The Power of Puppies: Looking at Cute Images Can Improve Focus

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“Cute” pictures of baby animals, including puppies and kittens, can have powerful effects on attention and concentration, psychological scientists at Hiroshima University in Japan have found.

Led by researcher Hiroshi Nittono, the team conducted three experiments with 132 university students and concluded that cute images may facilitate improved performance on detail-oriented tasks that require concentration.

“This study shows that viewing cute things improves subsequent performance in tasks that require behavioral carefulness, possibly by narrowing the breadth of attentional focus,” Nittono and colleagues write.

Research has long shown that people are predisposed to respond to “cute” baby-like features–a large head, a high protruding forehead, and large eyes—known as the “baby schema.” Baby animals also have baby schema characteristics, which helps explain why we think puppies and kittens are cuter than dogs and cats.

The baby schema can activate a number of innate processes in people, including smiling and positive affect and other nurturing behavior, but research suggests that cute images may also have an impact on attention and perception.

In the first experiment from Nittono's team, a group of 48 college students were asked to play a game similar to *Operation*. The students used tweezers to remove tiny plastic body parts from holes in the body of a "patient" without touching the sides of the holes. After playing one round of the game, half of the students looked at a series of seven images of cute puppies and kittens while the others viewed pictures of adult dogs and cats.

The students who had looked at cute baby animal photos significantly improved their performance on the second round. Interestingly, they engaged in the task at a slower, more deliberate pace after viewing the photos. The students who had looked at adult animal photos showed no change in performance and completed the task in the same amount of time in both trials.

"This finding suggests that viewing cute images makes participants behave more deliberately and perform tasks with greater time and care," writes Nittono.

Additional findings indicate that cute images specifically improve focus on details. Students were asked to identify a series of stimuli displayed on a screen while they were timed. Each stimulus was a larger letter composed of different, smaller letters. For example, they might look at a series of tiny Fs that composed the shape of a large letter H.

Between each task, students were randomly shown images of either baby animals, adult animals, or neutral objects. After viewing cute images, students were faster at processing the small letters relative to the large letter.

This result suggests that cute images help shift people's attention to better focus on details. One explanation for this could be because babies require caregivers to pay careful attention to their mental and physical wellbeing, as well as potential vigilance against any possible threats.

"This study provides further evidence that perceiving cuteness exerts immediate effects on cognition and behavior in a wider context than that related to caregiving or social interaction," the researchers conclude.

The researchers suggest that cute images may be helpful in improving performance for jobs that demand significant attention to detail, like air traffic control or software programmers. From the Super Bowl to the Puppy Bowl, this study suggests that puppies may be a winning choice for advertisers looking to stand out and make an impression.

"Puppies are powerful images that can easily bypass our conscious minds," says psychological scientist Kit Yarrow in a USA Today interview. "How folks feel about the puppies can transfer to their unconscious perception of a brand which, in turn, can affect purchase decisions."

Reference

Nittono, H., Fukushima, M., Yano, A., & Moriya, H. (2012). The power of kawaii: Viewing cute images promotes a careful behavior and narrows attentional focus. *PloS ONE*. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0046362